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Secret of Culpeper: A Hostage Family Bears Silent Burden

By Lawrence Feinberg

Washington Post Staff Writer

When Scott Ward suggested that his Cub Scout den in Culpeper, Va., send Christmas cards to the American hostages in Iran over a year ago, den leader Robert V. Heffern said he thought it was a great idea.

Heffern told Scott's mother, Connie Ward, how proud he was that the 8-year-old had come up with the suggestion, but Mrs. Ward just stared down at the floor, Heffern recalled. Then she told him something astounding: "Scotty's daddy is one of the hostages," she said.

Heffern said he looked through the pile of cards that the Scouts had made of construction paper. He found Scott's.

"Dear Daddy," it read. "I love you. Merry Christmas."

Aside from the 10 members of the Cub Scout den, who found out just before Christmas, few people in Culpeper knew that Phillip R. Ward was one of the hostages who spent 14 months in captivity.

At Mrs. Ward's request, the local paper, the Culpeper Star-Exponent, did not print the story. Its assistant editor, David Autry, said Mrs. Ward also turned down offers of help from local service groups and churches.

The State Department said Ward, 40, was a telecommunications technician. The Iranian militants accused him of taking part in intelligence work — a suggestion that some Culpeper townspeople thought might be true because of the secrecy in which his captivity was shrouded.

Finally, on Thursday the Star-Exponent printed a written statement from Mrs. Ward, thanking the paper for "respect[ing] my desire for privacy." Because of that and the support she received from friends, Mrs. Ward wrote that "Scott and I were able to maintain somewhat of a normal life style" while her husband was imprisoned.

"Tuesday [when the hostages were released] was the most frustrating, irritating, and elating day of my life," Mrs. Ward continued. "Last night I talked with my husband, Phil. It seemed unreal at first, but the longer we talked, the more it dawned on me it's really over... I just felt emotionally drained. All the ups and downs during the past 14 months had finally come to an end."

The Star-Exponent still has not been able to interview Mrs. Ward, Autry said. Several days ago when a Washington Post reporter called her home a man who wouldn't identify himself answered the phone and said Mrs. Ward didn't want to talk to the press. Yesterday the phone was attached to an answering machine that just asked callers to state their name and phone number.

Heffern, the Cub Scout leader, said the Scouts made bird feeders decorated with yellow ribbons after Phillip Ward appeared in a television tape from Tehran last Christmas Day and admonished Scott during a brief message, "Don't forget to feed the wild birds this winter, they'll probably be getting hungry."

"Scott was always matter-of-fact about things," said Heffern, who is an elementary school principal. "Kids are like that, you know. 'My daddy is a plumber,' one [scout] said. 'His daddy is a hostage.' I don't know if Scott really understood it all. But he knew some bad people some place were holding his dad."

He said Scott talked very little about his father's captivity for the first few months but then brought it up more and more. "He would say he was really mad, really angry that those Iranians were doing that to his father," Heffern said, "and the other boys would sympathize with him. But then somebody would say, 'Let's play ball,' and Scott would go off with the rest of them."

Heffern said he last saw Scott and Mrs. Ward at a den meeting 10 days ago. He said Connie Ward, a blond woman in her 30s, "seems like a very strong lady. She tried to keep things very low-key and talked about it without getting emotional. But you don't know what went on inside her."